



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2023 Winner | South Australia

Charlotte Chung

SEYMOUR COLLEGE

How significant was Australia's contribution to the Allied military victory on the Western Front in 1918?

"Should the worst happen, after everything has been done that honour will permit, Australians will stand beside the mother country to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling."¹

Above is the famous declaration by Australian Labor Party Leader Andrew Fisher from his election speech at Colac, Victoria, on July 31st, 1914, moments before Australia entered the First World War (WW1) in solidarity of Britain, her "mother country".² Forging values of mateship, courage, and comradeship that encompass not only the identity of Australia's WW1 soldiers, but the nation as a whole, this testament of unshakeable loyalty to Britain was arguably the birth of Australia's steadfast military service to the Allies of the British Empire. Through these ideals, it is clear Australia significantly contributed to the Allied military victory on the Western Front, due to efforts at Mont Saint-Quentin, Peronne, and on the Somme, and their attitude regardless of battle outcomes. However, there is extensive evidence that contributions of other Allied countries, including Britain, France, and the United States, were much greater, due to military numbers and resource accessibility and suppliance. As an additional result, Australian government and media have somewhat exaggerated the country's contributions, and this must be recognised by society to prevent skewed understandings.

Situated in France and Belgium as the most vital battleground of the First World War, it was on the Western Front that Australia significantly contributed to the Allies' military victory, through skill and attitude at Mont Saint-Quentin, Peronne, and on the Somme. August 1918's end saw German troops at their final stronghold, Mont Saint-Quentin, over the town of Peronne and

¹ Curtis, J 2014, 'To the last man'—Australia's entry to war in 1914 – Parliament of Australia, Aph.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/AustToWar1914>.

² Ibid.

the Somme River.³ A crucial observatory for strategic control, it was essential to the German's defence of the Somme, and thus, Australian Lieutenant General Sir John Monash, commander of Australian forces on the Western Front in 1918, was eager to capture it. This act allowed Allied military's advance to Peronne on the 1st of September,⁴ and force German withdrawal to their final line of defence, the Hindenburg Line, while greatly contributing to Australia's total captures of 29,144 prisoners and 338 guns on her withdrawal on October 5th.⁵ Resulting in sacrifice of 21,243 casualties,⁶ and creation of a gateway for several Allied victories as the greatest AIF achievement of all time, Monash commented following the battle that:

*"(It is) a testimony... to the pre-eminent
fighting qualities of the Australian soldier
considered individually, and, on the other hand,
to the collective capacity and efficiency of the military
effort made by the Corps".⁷*

While its reliability is debatable due to unique circumstances of its single author, the source is still extremely useful due to its insight into then-current Australian views, and the fact its contents, including said "fighting qualities", are strongly affirmed by military historians. For instance, Rhys Crawley's 2015 article, 'Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum' stated that, in consideration of WW1's broader context as a secondary source, "by 1918 Australian soldiers were both professional and adept at fighting and killing".⁸ Furthermore, Joan Beaumont's article of similar views emphasises unlikelihood of bias between the two articles,

³ Australian War Memorial 2016, *Mont St Quentin and Péronne: Australian Victories* | *The Australian War Memorial*, Awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/mtstquentin>>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *The Simpson Prize 2023* | Australian War Memorial n.d., www.awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>>. – Simpson Prize Source 4

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Australian War Memorial 2016, *Mont St Quentin and Péronne: Australian Victories* | *The Australian War Memorial*, Awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/mtstquentin>>.

⁸ *The Simpson Prize 2023* | Australian War Memorial n.d., www.awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>>. – Simpson Prize Source 3

demonstrating that by attracting international praise as “the most effective of all the forces on the side of the Allies”,⁹ these fighting qualities also shaped the Australian WW1 soldiers’ frontline attitude. Despite this, the source does not acknowledge that volunteerism in comparison to conscription was likely another contributing factor. For instance, “respect of their fellow soldiers” their most valued legacy,¹⁰ Australian soldiers tended to share the same belief that motivation did not stem from hope of survival, but instead from “prestige and reputation”.¹¹ Accounting for Britain’s second highest death toll at 6.8% (Appendix 1), it was also this common wish to fight that allowed for arguably exceptional service to Britain, while their mix of “fatalism and humour” uplifted those around them despite the traumatic environment¹², ensuring fighting was concentrated and ceaseless. Through such a time of ceaseless toil, Australia clearly contributed significantly to the Western Front Allied military victory through skill and attitude at Mont Saint-Quentin, Peronne, and on the Somme.

Despite this, there is extensive evidence that British, French and United States’ contributions were of greater significance to the Allied military victory on the Western Front. The AIF was deserving of its status as an “elite formation”,¹³ as later described in ‘Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum’, however, no matter tactical effectiveness, they were largely an infantry force in an artillery-dominated scene; one million shells were utilised to target the French by the Germans in an earlier Western Front battle, the 1916 Battle of Verdun, France.¹⁴ Effectiveness of the infantry significantly relied on success of artillery as a precondition, and in imperial armies of which the AIF contributed, developments in accuracy of and artillery itself was largely of British origin. This is not to mention that while Australia was the first to implement tanks on the Western Front, these amongst aircraft and other newly introduced weaponry were again provided by the British.¹⁵ Additionally, the British were supplying over

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Morale & relaxation* | Ergo n.d., ergo.slv.vic.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/australia-wwi/abroad-wwi/morale-relaxation>>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *The Simpson Prize 2023* | Australian War Memorial n.d., www.awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>>. – Simpson Prize Source 5

¹⁴ *Artillery* n.d., National WWI Museum and Memorial, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/artillery#:~:text=World%20War%20I%20was%20a>>.

¹⁵ *The Simpson Prize 2023* | Australian War Memorial n.d., www.awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>>. – Simpson Prize Source 5

30 million kilograms of meat to the Western Front each month,¹⁶ meals such as tinned 'Maconochie' beef and vegetable stew (Appendix 2) providing essential nutrients and sustenance to keep Allied soldiers alive across the Front, including the French. With 1.38 million killed and 3.6 million wounded, France's military contribution through military numbers in relation to population size was far higher than any other Ally,¹⁷ demonstrative of their commitment to the Allied victory. Moreover, as with Britain and Australia, the French supplied the American Expeditionary Force on their 1917 entry into WW1 with all guns and tanks, and the majority of its aircraft and artillery, relieving pressure on other Allied forces.¹⁸ Furthermore, while it is argued Australia contributed valuably through raw materials, many of these resources could not be transported due to limited shipping ability to Europe. Much more of these came from the United States, their exports to Europe amounting to \$4.062 billion in 1917,¹⁹ and their total enlistment of 2 million men serving on the Western Front much of the driving force behind the Hundred Days Offensive that brought victory to the Allies.^{20 21} From all this it is clear Australia's part in WW1 was, although certainly influential, a smaller role in a much greater effort led by the British, French and United States.

There is, however, an additional layer regarding the true significance of Australia's contribution to the Allied military victory due to Australian exaggeration. Problematically, much of Australian society's knowledge of WW1 has evolved without consideration of the contributions listed in the previous paragraph, but instead from that of Australian popular history. With little basis in proper historical or archival research, these accounts "fail to place their battles within a broader context of who was fighting on Australia's left and right",²² and it is arguably

¹⁶ *The Food That Fuelled The Front* 2018, Imperial War Museums, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-food-that-fuelled-the-front>>.

¹⁷ Stevenson, D 2000, *French Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, in R Chickering & S Förster (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 297–326, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/great-war-total-war/french-strategy-on-the-western-front-19141918/5BFBA7DA50E8EC47004FB3E5A7A3068A>>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Rockoff, H n.d., *U.S. Economy in World War I*, eh.net, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://eh.net/encyclopedia/u-s-economy-in-world-war-i/>>.

²⁰ *American Expeditionary Forces | International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1)* 2019, 1914-1918-online.net, viewed 1 October 2022, <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/american_expeditionary_forces>.

²¹ *The Hundred Days Offensive* n.d., National WWI Museum and Memorial, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/hundred-days-offensive>>.

²² *The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial* n.d., www.awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>>. – Simpson Prize Source 3

shameful that their own government and media is largely at fault. For example, former Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, did not acknowledge any other country when thanking Australian service personnel during her 2013 ANZAC Day speech in Townsville.²³ In a similar instance, when demonstrating the necessity of viewing Gallipoli through a lens of overall Western Front operations, Prime Minister Tony Abbot's 2014 Canberra address failed to appreciate the role of Australia's allies.²⁴ However, even this exaggeration in the presence of the now Prince and Princess of Wales, pales in comparison to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's miniscule mention to France when speaking on their land, other than the saving of Villers-Bretonneux "in the defence of freedom" by Australian troops.²⁵ Overvalue of Australian contribution is also evident in the 1920 Amiens Cathedral Memorial Plaque, seen in Appendix 3. Standing in glory as it thanks the AIF for the giving of their lives in the cause of "justice, liberty and humanity", it appears the words of thanks are French. However, the evidently biased tablet yet again proves exaggeration claims to be true, as it was erected by the Australian government themselves.²⁶ Through repeated false accounts such as these, it is much of society has gained the impression that Australia was of credit for the Allied military victory on the Western Front, when this is clearly not so.

Australia did significantly contribute to the Allied military victory on the Western Front, however contributions of other Allied countries were far greater. Australia's efforts at Mont Saint-Quentin, Peronne, and on the Somme worked simultaneously with their unshakeable fighting spirit to allow Allies to drastically progress during WW1, but it is clear the resources and military numbers provided by Britain, France, and the United States were the greatest contributors to the victory. Furthermore, Australian contribution has been undoubtedly exaggerated by the government and media; this overvalue has failed to be noticed by most Australians even today. Despite all this, Australian soldiers of the First World War forged values of mateship, courage, and comradeship that encompassed not only their identity then, but paved a legacy of steadfast determination still present today. Thus, today's Australia must

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

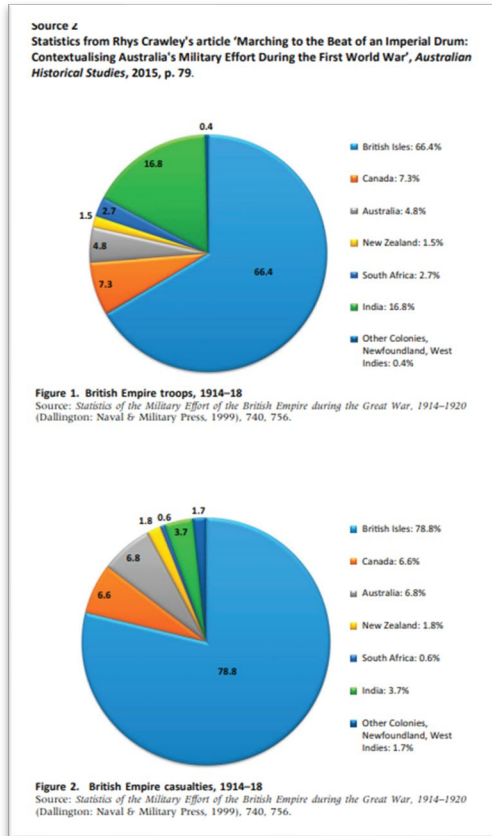
²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

acknowledge their WW1 fighters' efforts within the broader context of the Western Front; only then will Australia's contribution to the Allied military victory be accurately represented.

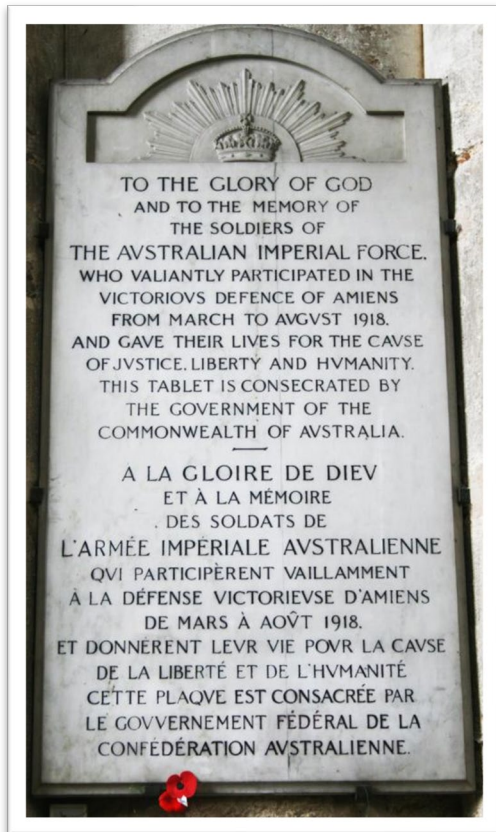
Appendices

Appendix 1: created in 2015 by Rhys Crawley, these two pie charts from the article, 'Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum' depict the nationalities of all British Empire soldiers who fought and were casualties during the First World War.



Appendix 2: the British Empire was sending over 30 million kilograms of food to the Western Front every month by 1918. Named after the company, 'Maconochie', that created it, these tins of beef and vegetable stew became staples of the British soldier's diet.





Appendix 3: erected in 1920 by the Australian Government, this Memorial Plaque to the left stands at Amiens Cathedral, where it thanks the soldiers of the AIF for their contributions to the Australian Western Front efforts.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Curtis, J 2014, *'To the last man'—Australia's entry to war in 1914 – Parliament of Australia*, Aph.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/AustToWar1914>.

The Food That Fuelled The Front 2018, Imperial War Museums, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-food-that-fuelled-the-front>>.

The Hundred Days Offensive n.d., National WWI Museum and Memorial, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/hundred-days-offensive>>.

The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial n.d., www.awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>>. (Sources 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8)

Secondary sources:

American Expeditionary Forces | International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1) 2019, 1914-1918-online.net, viewed 1 October 2022, <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/american_expeditionary_forces>.

Artillery n.d., National WWI Museum and Memorial, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/artillery#:~:text=World%20War%20I%20was%20a>>.

Australian War Memorial 2016, *Mont St Quentin and Péronne: Australian Victories | The Australian War Memorial*, Awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/mtstquentin>>.

Morale & relaxation | Ergo n.d., ergo.slv.vic.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/australia-wwi/abroad-wwi/morale-relaxation>>.

Rockoff, H n.d., *U.S. Economy in World War I*, eh.net, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://eh.net/encyclopedia/u-s-economy-in-world-war-i/>>.

Stevenson, D 2000, *French Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, in R Chickering & S Förster (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 297–326, viewed 1

October 2022, <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/great-war-total-war/french-strategy-on-the-western-front-19141918/5BFBA7DA50E8EC47004FB3E5A7A3068A>>.

The Food That Fuelled The Front 2018, Imperial War Museums, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-food-that-fuelled-the-front>>.

The Hundred Days Offensive n.d., National WWI Museum and Memorial, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/hundred-days-offensive>>.

The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial n.d., www.awm.gov.au, viewed 1 October 2022, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2023>>. (Sources 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8)